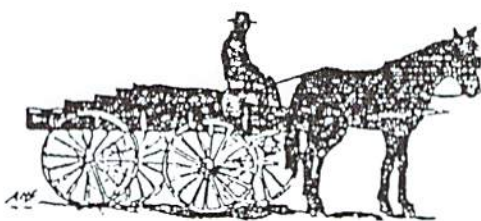


## The Last Horse on High Street



by Philip O. Swanson

It's one of those truths that eternally dog us—that we never appreciate anything (or anybody) until he's gone . . .

□ NEW ENGLAND'S LEAST PREPOSSESSING season, I think, is that time of year that may be called late winter or very early spring. The cold crystal beauty that winter possessed in her youth has been made spongy and drab by blustering March winds. The trees have yet to bud, and the grass, grudgingly liberated by receding patches of soot-specked snow, is brown and soggy underfoot. It is as though winter knows that she is to be supplanted by her beautiful young rival, spring, and with all the grace of a rain-drenched old trollop vindictively gives little children measles, or failing there, ruins their skating and fills playgrounds with puddles.

In the country this is the season when old people die. Their last strength, spent in the struggle to live through another uphill winter, leaves them prostrate on the threshold of a still unsighted spring.

It was on a Sunday afternoon in early March that Sprague's horse foundered in Black Water Swamp. For some reason I remember the day very well. Grandpa and I were play-

ing checkers in the front room after a big Sunday dinner. He was winning and cat-napping as usual, and from the kitchen came the familiar clatter of dishes, softened by Grandma's humming the last hymn of the morning's service.

There was a slow clop, clop in the street, and we looked out to see Dan Hanson hunched on the cranberry-box seat of a farm wagon heading "down street" behind the stiff-legged gait of old man Sprague's horse.

Grandma came into the sitting room to get a better look at who was going by, and I remember her sputtering as she polished a dinner plate that no good ever came from work done on the Lord's day.

Two games and several cat-naps later there was a knock at the back door. It was Dan on foot. He had bought six cords of wood, cut that winter in Black Water Swamp, and was using Sprague's horse to get it out; but the frost was coming out of the ground and the old horse had sunk in a soft spot and would need the help of several men to get out.

Grandpa and I picked up some gunny sacks in the grain room and headed for the swamp while Dan went to get more help.

The trail through the swamp was easy to follow, for the wagon had to bend and break its way through the brush, and the big round hoofmarks got deeper and deeper as the trail left high ground.

When we came to the horse, only his ears recognized our presence, turning with us as we walked around him measuring his plight. His sides were heaving slowly and his head moved slightly up and down with each deep breath. His attitude seemed to say that he had already done his best to get up, and now he would wait stoically for the creature who had steered him into this mess to do something about getting him out. A young horse might have thrashed himself into a wild-eyed frenzy, but Sprague's old plug couldn't afford such foolish energy.

The solitude of the swamp and the big animal belly-deep in the muck suggested a picture of some prehistoric creature held in the inexorable grip of primordial quicksand, waiting a million years for an earnest, bespectacled scientist to study his fossilized bones.

When Dan came back with the MacFarland boys and Herb Nelson, there was much talk of a block and tackle, and of hitching the horse to a truck to pull him out. But there were only bunches of bog grass and maple shoots for fifty yards in any direction; so the block and tackle idea was as farfetched as that of driving a truck into the morass.

The only thing we could do was to roll the horse over by the crude strength of our numbers and try to shove gunny sacks and brush under him while he was on his side. Time after time we grunted together and rolled him over, but each time he rolled back, trying to right himself, and plunged his stiff black legs back into the muck to assume his old hopeless position.

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The good-natured railery that had marked the beginning of the struggle gave way to steady grunting and cursing as the day wore thin and darkness began to seep into the silent recesses of the swamp. Hope of success faded within us as the light of day. As doubt deepened with the darkness, we looked down with pity at the mud-plastered back sending up little wisps in the evening chill.

News of the horse's plight had spread the length of our street, and lanterns and flashlights began bobbing toward us from the direction of the road. They approached us through the dark like purposeful fireflies, with men's voices shouting to find our position.

I think everyone else had secretly given up hope of saving the horse when Grandpa came up with his plan. It was simple! Why hadn't we thought of it before? From the piles of cordwood that had indirectly caused all the trouble we built a solid platform, corduroy fashion, alongside the tired horse. We all knew that this would support him, and with the help of the late comers we rolled him high and dry up on the level pile of wood. Quickly we enlarged the platform so that he would have plenty of room to gain his feet without slipping off into the mud.

Now it was up to the horse. All he had to do was gather his legs beneath him and lunge to his feet. We waited. The horse didn't try to get up, so we urged him. Grandpa told me to hold up the horse's head while the others lifted where they could. It was no use. The old legs, still enough in summer, were now as rigid as the wood they lay upon. He had been too long in the half-frozen mud.

Dan headed home for his shotgun, with old man Sprague's permission. The rest of us pushed and pulled the empty wagon back to the road. I looked back once and wondered what

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the old horse thought to see us pull his wagon away and leave him alone with a lighted lantern to guide his merciful doom.

Grandpa and I didn't talk at all on the way home. When we got into the house it was after ten o'clock and Grandma ripped into us as soon as she saw us. She didn't even ask about the horse. Maybe she knew by our looks.

"A young boy and an old fool covered with mud and wet to the skin and courtin' pneumonia in the middle of the night," she sputtered. "All for an old horse that was too old to work anyway!" Grandpa just kept washing up at the kitchen sink.

"You know, Lydia," he said finally. "That was the last horse on High Street."

"Why, so it was," said Grandma. "Poor old thing." ♦♦